

On My Mind
3/31/00

Well, I committed what I consider a cardinal sin last week - I neglected to note that it was Covenant Day, to my mind the most significant of the CNMI holidays. After repeatedly criticizing government and everyone else for doing so little to observe local holidays, finding that I've committed the same error myself is more than a little embarrassing. And I'm not quite sure how to make amends.

March 24 marks the date that a joint resolution approving the Covenant, which had been passed by both houses of the U.S. Congress, was signed into law by President Gerald Ford. The Covenant is the document that spells out the CNMI's relationship with the U.S., and that reserves to the CNMI a number of rights and privileges that no other U.S. entities have.

The Covenant provides the foundation for the CNMI Constitution, and thus for the form and shape of the CNMI itself. Without the agreements so laboriously worked out and so carefully crafted into the language of the Covenant, the CNMI could have become a very different place than it is today. Since it is the signing of the Covenant into law that gave birth to the CNMI, the anniversary of the enactment of the Covenant should be the most honored, the most important, secular holiday in the CNMI.

For a brief time it was - when the NMC Archives Division, among others, sponsored annual Covenant Day forums. The Forums brought together government officials and legislators, Covenant signatories, students, teachers, and the general public, to examine and discuss the various provisions of the Covenant. The Forums provided a focus for observing the holiday, served as reminder of the holiday's significance.

It shouldn't be necessary to make such a happening a legal requirement, but if there's no other way to ensure that a responsible party and sufficient funds are designated for such an observance, perhaps it's time to pass a law?

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The <I>Tribune</I> featured a shocking headline this past Monday: "Over 2,500 businesses did not renew permit in 1999." Of 3,410 businesses registered in 1998, the front-page story said, only 812 had renewed their licenses by the end of December 1999.

On the other hand, during 1999, 2,775 new business licenses were issued. In addition to the 812 renewals, there were thus a total of 3,587 businesses registered last year.

A casual reading of the story should have indicated that there was something wrong with the story. More than 2,500 new businesses last year? Even knowing that anyone with a house or apartment for rent must have a license, that all business licenses now reflect only a single occupation, that number seems grossly exaggerated. The news that only 812 of all the businesses on island renewed their licenses seems equally unreal.

The truth of the matter is that the story has it all wrong. The reporter has the numbers reversed. According to officials at the Department of Commerce's statistics division and business license office, 2,775 businesses renewed their licenses in 1999, and only 812 did not renew their license. Similar figures cited by the article are equally in error for 1998, though oddly enough, for 1997 the figures given by the reporter are correct.

Yet four days after the story appeared, no one seems to have questioned any of the figures. There is no letter to the editor pointing out the errors. Nor is there any statement of error correction by the paper - which could be expected if a reader had called to report the error.

To let such a story stand uncorrected is the height of irresponsibility. And it certainly calls into question the reliability, the credibility of the paper's content. Moreover, it is a gross disservice to the entire CNMI to let such a false, frightening, headline stand at a time when the viability of the island's economy is of so much concern.

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There has been another death apparently due to over-reaction by the police to casual movements by persons of color - the shooting of Patrick Dorismond in New York City earlier this month. Unfortunately the recent failure by the jury to find anyone at fault for the death of the man shot down by New York City police in the lobby of his apartment building would appear to have given police encouragement to shoot first and ask questions later.

But where the practice of shooting to kill under such circumstances comes from is quite a different matter. There was a time when whether to shoot to deter, or perhaps to maim, as opposed to shooting to kill was a major issue of debate. If the force of a weapon was necessary, one would shoot to wound, to stop the attack. Among other things, that made it possible to ask the questions, to avoid the death of innocent people.

Now it appears to be taken for granted - at least among New York City police - that the only way to use one's gun is to kill. Never mind less lethal uses. Never mind the possible innocence of the victim. Could the shift in practice be due to a decline in the training and ability of the police - that they no longer can be relied upon to hit only an arm or a leg?

For some reason, that issue - of why the police shot to kill rather than to wound - was not brought up in either case - at least insofar as local media reports go. I find that more than a little disturbing.

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Also disturbing, but on a different level, is the junket to Washington, D.C. due to be taken by 17 members of the CNMI legislature next week. According to the information in the media, the only parties the CNMI legislators plan to call on are Republican. Given that it is the Republicans who already support the CNMI position regarding minimum wage and control of

immigration, and who are already opposed to Clinton's take-over plan, that doesn't make a lot of sense.

If the intent is to lobby on behalf of the CNMI, it would seem to make a lot more sense to call on the Democrats - to try to change the minds of those who favor Clinton's plan, to seek out and talk to those who oppose the CNMI position.

It is, moreover, a tactical error to align the CNMI with only one party. To begin with, there is not that direct a connection between the goals and platforms of the two mainland parties and their CNMI counterparts. In addition, though the Republicans are in the majority in the U.S. House at the moment, they do not have all that large a majority, and that could change in another year and a half in any case. In the meantime, the CNMI urgently needs friends and supporters in both parties - now.

Nor has anyone attempted to explain just why it takes 17 legislators to make the CNMI's position known to Congress. It can only leave a poor impression - both at home and in Washington - that in its supposed time of economic difficulties, the CNMI legislature would be so extravagant.

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On the brighter side, congratulations to the Rota Legislative Delegation for deciding to ban the use of scuba tanks for reef fishing in Rota's lagoon and coastal waters. Noting that the ban is necessary to preserve Rota's marine life and ecosystem for future generations, the Delegation has passed Senate Local Bill No. 12-1, introduced by Senator Ricardo S. Atalig, to prohibit commercial and non-commercial fishermen from using scuba tanks while reef fishing. The bill has been sent to the Governor for his review and approval. Saipan should take note.

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For web surfers who haven't found it yet, a web page that has just come to my attention is chamorro.com. It's not full of flashing billboard advertisements, it has a very island-appropriate system for exploring its various files, it's got some great references and pointers to other web pages, and its interactive pages are refereed. Soon to come: a "sister" page for the Refalawasch.